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Review Articles

Recent Studies of the Role of Writing in Mesopotamian Civilization*

Karen RADNER and Eleanor ROBSON eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*. Oxford Handbooks in Classics and Ancient History. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. xvi + 805 pp. ISBN: 978-0-19-955730-1 (hbk.). £110.00 / \$150.00.

Seth RICHARDSON ed., *Rebellions and Peripheries in the Cuneiform World*. American Oriental Series 91. Ann Arbor: American Oriental Society, 2010. xxxii + 109 pp. ISBN: 978-0-940490-23-9 (hbk.). \$35.00.

Dominique CHARPIN, *Reading and Writing in Babylon*. Translated by Jane Marie Todd. Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2010. xvii + 318 pp. ISBN: 978-0-674-04968-0 (hbk.). \$29.95 / £22.95 / €27.00.

The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture is one of the most original and interesting examples of a new genre of collective works offering surveys or case studies of what is known about ancient Mesopotamia.¹ Consisting of thirty-five chapters, each with suggestions for further reading and a bibliography, divided in seven parts, each with its own introductory essay, the *Oxford Handbook* is the most sophisticated and demanding entrant in this crowded field, a rich and fascinating reading experience. The volume is, moreover, abundantly illustrated with images, in many cases seldom seen in general publications or published here for the first time, especially of tablets. The contributors are at all stages in the *cursus honorum*, from graduate students to veteran scholars. The unifying principle is cuneiform

¹ Pride of place goes to Jack M. Sasson ed., *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), the largest undertaking of its kind since Sabatino Moscati ed., *L'Alba della Civiltà* (Turin: UTET, 1976). Other collections include Gwendolyn Leick, ed., *The Babylonian World* (New York: Routledge, 2007), and Daniel C. Snell ed., *A Companion to the Ancient Near East* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005). Each of these has different goals and approaches, so there is remarkably little overlap.

writing and its consequences, rather than a broad survey of history and civilization in which writing would find a part. The aim of the editors is to link these studies with other agendas in modern scholarship, which they do with a light but sure touch.

One way to evaluate this achievement is to consider what it would have looked like had it been published forty-five years ago, when A. Leo Oppenheim, whose phrase 'stream of tradition' runs like a *leitmotif* through this book, was lamenting the stagnation of Assyriology.² Most of the contributions could not have been written at all or in anything like their present form, while the remaining would read quite differently. At the outset, then, this book is a tribute to the extraordinary development and diversification of Assyriology in the last half century, despite the marginality of the discipline on the modern university scene. It offers as well ample promise of like or greater progress in the future. Nor is this owing solely to the flood of new sources available, overwhelming as that is and without parallel elsewhere in the ancient world; the reader of these pages will sense the dynamism and energy of researchers freed from the time-robbing rote of building their own dictionaries and data bases to which their predecessors devoted so much energy. Their easier access to a wealth of information and ideas than was possible a half century ago broadens their horizons and choice of projects, and this shows itself in their openness to innovative techniques and approaches.

The chronological horizon of this book tends to be the Ur III and Old Babylonian periods, as well as the late eighth through the late sixth centuries. This eliminates some richly documented phases, for example the Early Dynastic and Akkadian periods, and such active areas of the discipline as the Old Assyrian merchant colonies in Anatolia or late Bronze Age diplomacy, both of which show writing in action in ways not dealt with here. In addition, the Hellenistic period draws two studies (Geert de Breucker and Philippe Clancier) and the Middle Babylonian period two (Yoram Cohen and Sivan Kedar, Mark Weeden). The editors are, of course, well aware of this distribution and consider it primarily a function of the source material (xxxi), but it could also be a question of where some of the most sophisticated work in Assyriology is now being carried on. Forty-five years ago, Neo-Babylonian studies were largely scattered treatments of interesting texts, handbooks of letters and documents in translation,

² A. L. Oppenheim, *Ancient Mesopotamia, Portrait of a Dead Civilization*. Revised edition completed by Erica Reiner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 30.

and studies of legal formulae. This volume shows how much has changed since then. As for the Hellenistic period, Clancier does not even mention the one major reading of that time, honorable forerunner of his own, G. Goossens' eloquent but now antiquated essay of 1941.³ Ur III studies were overwhelmingly random text publications; Old Babylonian had not yet experienced its French Revolution.

Some contributions offer concise coverage of a huge topic, among them masterpieces such as Michael Jursa's survey of writing in the Neo-Babylonian period, Karen Radner's presentation of the written evidence from the Neo-Assyrian courts, Eleanor Robson's depiction of how scholarly knowledge was both preserved and added to, Francesca Rochberg's essay on divination and astronomy, Daniel Schwemer on magic. The non-specialist reader will scarcely be aware how much ground these cover so succinctly until he delves into some of their topics in more detail. Some contributions are case studies taking up a single aspect of a broader issue, such as Hagan Brunke on banquets, who largely confines himself to one group of administrative documents, new and of considerable interest, but at the price of omitting even a mention of such matters as Assurnasirpal's great feast, which might have been worth a sentence. Fabienne Huber Vulliet discusses letters as literature, but largely confining herself to the Royal Correspondence of Ur and the question of its historical authenticity, which used to be taken for granted, now rather the opposite. Some contributors, such as Dominique Charpin, weave differing views into their narrative, so the reader is aware of them as he proceeds, whereas others, such as Michel Tanret, prefers to give what they thought was the most convincing account. For example, Tanret believes that Ur-Utu's father, a lament singer, was not a castrato so not all his children were adopted (273), leaving the reader to find in Nele Ziegler's essay (300) the opposite view.

Some writers feel the need to tilt at 'ancient Oriental' windmills (Benjamin R. Foster, Eva von Dassow); others grapple at the outset with problems of definition and conceptualization (Schwemer, whose task is literacy and magic). Statistics are new and revealing, as in Steve Tinney's survey of Old Babylonian literature from the perspective of tablet finds. He is, incidentally, correct about the Larsa provenience of many Yale Old Babylonian literary tablets; Professor Albert Tobias Clay acquired 1300 Larsa tablets in

³ G. Goossens, 'Au Déclin de la Civilisation Babylonienne: Uruk sous les Séleucides', *Académie Royale des Sciences, des Lettres et des Beaux-Arts de Belgique: Bulletin de la Classe des Lettres et des Sciences Morales et Politiques* 27 (1941), pp. 223-244.

one purchase, direct from Iraq, in 1913. Kings and princes loom large (Silvie Zamazalová, Radner, Eckart Frahm, Nicole Brisch, Caroline Waerzeggers), with Frahm noting the inverse relationship between scholars' access to men of power and their freedom of thought and inquiry. In like spirit, Brisch shows how the Sumerian and Babylonian king was presented in writing by his learned subjects, especially those who indirectly or directly owed him their living. In this cavalcade of royalty, Baker's analysis of Babylonian urban life is welcome, a companion piece to Waerzeggers' reconstruction of the interdependency of the Neo-Babylonian ruling elite.

Counting and reckoning are part of the picture, hence the contributions of John M. Steele on time and Gregory Chambon on numeracy. De Breucker offers a rehabilitation of Berossus, and Frans van Koppen's sympathetic picture of a Babylonian scholar and the world he lived in is brilliantly done. Charpin's Asqudum shows warm and human qualities despite his political adroitness, and comes across as a many-sided, ambitious man. Nele Ziegler brings the musical world of Mari to life, with its jealousies and rivalries, not unlike the similar rivalries in the French, German, and Italian courts of the eighteenth century. Brigitte Lion explores gender and literacy, showing the possibilities of a topic that hitherto is passed over in a sentence or two. Ulla Susanne Koch untangles the processes of divination in heaven and entrails. Barbara Böck introduces the medicaments and pharmacology of the Babylonian physician, whose craft is rather overshadowed in this collection by those of astronomers and diviners. Of two topics that would have drawn substantial essays in such a collection forty-five years ago, war and law, Andreas Fuchs takes up the Assyrian military, pointing out reasons for its unexampled longevity and success, and Sophie Demare-Lafont focuses on law and writing, with special reference to judging and the decision-making process.

There are plenty of new ideas and proposals to consider, scattered throughout the book, such as Frans Wiggermann's suggestion that a Fara-period sketch is a world map centered on Nippur (673). The reader can debate on every page; for example, I see no likelihood that the letter Weeden presents (599) is anything but a school exercise, belonging with another from the same find, so no evidence for the *edubba'a* in the Old Babylonian period.⁴

Although any reader will consider some essays more successful and informative than others, such is the quality and intellectual depth of this

⁴ Benjamin R. Foster, *Before the Muses: An Anthology of Akkadian Literature* (Bethesda: CDL Press, 2005), p. 225.

volume that it seems unlikely any two readers will agree on distribution of praise and blame. The editing and translating are of very high quality; typographical errors and editorial lapses are so few, considering the complexity and scale of this work, that it would be churlish to mention them (in a reprinting, Anne Löhnert's rendering of line 4 of the *balag* excerpt [411] might be repaired). Mistakes of fact are rare and trivial too; De Breucker can be readily forgiven for not knowing that Babylon is attested in the Akkadian period (650); one suspects a contributing factor to its rise in importance was Naram-Sin's destruction of Kish. Or, Philippe Clancier's suggestion that the offerings to Sargon's statue at Sippar, started by Nabonidus, who tells us why he did so, and are attested only as late as the time of Cambyses, were 'more in the vein of a Greek hero than a ruler cult' (761) should not have made it into type.

This book stands as triumph of a 'useless discipline', to evoke a favorite phrase of Jean Bottéro,⁵ a proud and immensely successful declaration of what modern cuneiform studies has to offer any serious student of ancient civilizations. For what other part of the world than Greater Mesopotamia, for two thousand years prior to the birth of Alexander, could such a collection of studies on so many aspects of literate culture be conceived, executed so ably, and offer so much that is new and important to the greater human story?

Seth Richardson's volume takes another approach to written evidence, in this case focused on the ideas of rebellion and periphery, the two being linked in the notion that peripheral lands that would not submit to powerful centers were considered rebellious by the ruling authority in the center. The discussion plays out on both theoretical and specific levels, in the cases of Nicole Brisch and Sarah C. Melville in particular, ably combined. Richardson opens with two wide-ranging essays, looking for rebellion and resistance in what is said and by whom, using what terms. He sets a detailed agenda for the inquiry, offering much to think about. The idea that local assemblies were focuses of resistance to the central authority was first argued in detail by Igor Diakonoff more than half a century ago,⁶ and the problem with this thesis has always been lack of evidence for it, attractive as the idea may be. One of Shulgi's poets dismissed barbarian lands

⁵ Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods*. Translated by Zainab Bahrani and Marc Van de Mieroop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁶ I. M. Diakonoff, *Obshchestvennyi i gosudarstvennyi stroi drevnego Dvurech'ia: Shumer* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Vostochnoi Literatury, 1959), p. 217.

as illiterate, so, as Richardson points out, the modern reader usually has only one version of the story. Brisch is struck by the focus of Ur III praise poetry on peripheries, rather than on the core, as if the core were generally obedient. One suspects this may be a response to the Akkadian tradition, which stands out because it proclaimed a new model of kingship that had triumphed by overcoming internal rebellion. Already the founder of the dynasty, Sargon, introduced a title stating that no one successfully opposed him; his son and successor Rimush dwelt at length on rebellions in Sumer in his surviving inscriptions, and Naram-Sin elevated a widespread rebellion into a cosmic event that was never forgotten in Mesopotamian tradition. For the Akkadian kings, their success in a struggle against rebels and usurpers everywhere was a vital part of their self-narrative. The later historical omens about the Akkadian kings took up this theme, as did Akkadian literature, but turned it against them, with considerable rearrangement of the facts. Thus, the great rebellion against Naram-Sin could be shifted to Sargon and three of the five dynasts were said to have been assassinated 'with cylinder seals' (or, sealed documents). The Ur III kings preferred to transfer all this drama to the periphery; on the home front all was well.

Brisch also shows that rebellion could be a delicate subject, depending on where and when. The kings of Larsa and Babylon preferred not to refer to domestic rebellion, or only obliquely. Rim-Sin's appearance, in Akkadian, at Ur, but not at Nippur, may well, therefore, have been politically motivated. Her pieces respond well to Richardson's suggestion to bring messy politics into the sometimes static depictions of the ebb and flow of authority in Mesopotamian society.

Melville's study of a group of small, rival states, caught on the peripheries of three great empires, is a model of the kind of historical writing appealed for in this volume, based on a careful reading of a handful of sources and a good sense of geography and strategy. Raymond Westbrook brings the legal mind to the discussion, in this case with a particularly fine analysis, showing the unspoken legalistic background behind some rather defensive treaty language. There was a kind of unwritten law, he shows, that can be detected in the writings available to us and that in fact motivates it. Amanda H. Podany takes up the establishment of kinship relations in early second-millennium politics as an example of unwritten law before the Late Bronze Age; kinship by declaration or marriage was a recognizable political grid, but surprisingly complex, and understood rather differently in Egypt than in Western Asia. Kinship is, of course, no guarantee of lack of strife, so the Late Bronze Age 'law of nations' may well have evolved from the

recognition that kinship was not so effective as it may have seemed five hundred years earlier; thus, dynastic marriages became more matters of prestige than strategy (so Melville suggests for Tabal too).

Dominique Charpin's book cuts to the heart of the matter, the very acts of reading and writing within Mesopotamia, often set against the background of formal speech, such as contracts, oaths, and spells, and sometimes contrasted with each other. In six succinct and dynamic chapters, he discusses how and who learned to read and write, administrative documents, letters, formal records, such as oaths, contracts, and treaties, literary works, and texts written for gods or posterity, how and why they were drawn up and where they were kept and for how long. Nor is this a work entirely for non-specialists. Charpin's conceptualization of the subject at hand and his skill in deploying the evidence will be of interest to colleagues as well, not to mention his comments on a variety of issues in which he often takes a strong personal stand. For example, he does not consider the late third and early second millennium documents normally referred to as 'treaties' to be treaties as such; he is critical of the concepts of 'library' and 'archive' as the terms are often used in the field; he thinks a distinction between 'dead' and 'living' archives should be maintained; he does not believe in a Mesopotamian 'state' (though surely Assurbanipal would have agreed with *l'état c'est moi*). And so on. But there is not a dull page in this study.

Charpin further takes occasions to discuss Assyriology rather than ancient evidence. For example, he says very little about the development of writing compared to his presentation of the decipherment of cuneiform. He hopes, forlornly perhaps, that readers will be interested in how Assyriologists go about their profession, so devotes some unexpected pages to that subject. He comments on such matters as palaeographical manuals, not a topic the general reader might readily see the need for; in effect, there is sometimes a kind of counterpoint between the ancient materials and the modern discipline that will keep the specialist alert.

One can always comment on details. Although Charpin thinks that the Old Babylonian scribe's métier was primarily to write correspondence (115), a scribe well-known to him tells us that his main task was twofold: to frame his master's thoughts in good style (as Charpin says), but also to remind his lord of what he has forgotten, as Charpin himself notes elsewhere (177). Although he cites no evidence for pious preservation of old tablets, there is reason to believe that ancient tablets were sometimes

preserved and studied, even circulated, as relics.⁷ The translation (21) of the schoolboy's self-predication misses its irony: school twenty-four days a month 'that wasn't long (oh no, not at all!)'. One wonders if Mesopotamian culture really was ossifying as early as Charpin thinks (213). If such works as the Erra Epic or Sargon's eighth campaign show that Akkadian itself was alive and well in the first half of the first millennium, one may someday detect, when Mesopotamian scholarship is better reconstructed, new forms of creative intellectual activity then developing, which till now lie buried in the shattered debris of the great series as we now have them. His belief that writing derives from pictograms must set aside the non-pictographic signs present already in the earliest writing, such as the well-known sign for 'sheep', for which a pictographic explanation led one scholar to suggest that it was a sheep seen from behind.⁸ On the other hand, Charpin has many interesting and new things to say even about some frequently discussed topics, such as Assurbanipal's library, plus discussion of other topics not addressed elsewhere. As one would expect, there are some fascinating new Mari materials scattered throughout.

Reading and Writing in Babylon is a translation and revision of a French original, in acknowledgment of the sharp decline in the study of French in the United States. The translation generally reads well, and is not the author's responsibility, but it must be said that it falls short of Charpin's amply demonstrated passion for clarity and accuracy. The various Gallisms scattered throughout (e.g. 'more ancient' for 'older' [108], 'insist' for 'emphasize' [53], 'precious' for 'valuable' [47]) are only stylistic flaws, but if this translation had been reviewed by an English-speaking Assyriologist, a fair number of mistakes or poor or wrong choices of words could have been avoided, for example, 'cells' for 'cases' (7 and 56), 'restitution' for 'restoration' (11), 'store' for 'storehouse' (22), 'fidelity' for 'loyalty' (155), 'salvation' for 'well-being' (47), 'anepigraphic' for 'uninscribed' (72). Some

⁷ Giuseppe Visicato and Aage Westenholz, 'Some Unpublished Sale Contracts from Fara'. In: Simonetta Graziani, Maria Cristina Casaburi, and Luigi Cagni eds., *Studi sul Vicino Oriente Antico: Dedicati alla Memoria di Luigi Cagni*. Istituto Universitario Orientale, Dipartimento di Studi Asiatici, Series Minor 61 (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 2000), pp. 309-318; A.R. George ed., *Cuneiform Royal Inscriptions and Related Texts in the Schøyen Collection*. Cornell University Studies in Assyriology and Sumerology 17/Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection 6 (Bethesda: CDI Press, 2011), p. 13.

⁸ A. Deimel ed., *Sumerisches Lexikon* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum Biblicum, 1933), IV, 987.

renderings are likely to give the reader pause or even baffle him, e.g., 'support' for 'surface' or 'medium' (52, 98, 262, and elsewhere); 'diplomats' (68 and elsewhere) in the obsolete sense, 'study of documents', 'sermon' for 'speech' (53), 'the arms' of the gods (113), 'the matrix of Assur' (104, compare 92), 'enjambement' for carry-over of writing from the end of a preceding line (76), 'decade' for 'decad' (39), 'juror' for a person swearing an oath (163), 'cast' for 'squeeze' (240), and various others, such as 'dispositions' in the oath translated on page 163. A superior knowledge of French does not necessarily bring with it a knowledge of the correct terms used in modern scholarly disciplines, so one hopes that future translations of French Mesopotamian studies for the American market will aim for greater technical precision than shown here.

Nevertheless, one comes away from reading this fascinating book with a deep admiration for the scholarly achievement, versatility, and reflection that went into producing it. Indeed, anyone privileged to make his way through the 1200 pages of these three splendid contributions to ancient Near Eastern studies will surely be enriched and encouraged by the intelligence, erudition, originality, and scholarly commitment that they represent, none of which would have been possible had not generations of scribes mastered their craft and devoted themselves to its preservation and diffusion.

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